STANDARDS OF LIVING
IN THE
LATER MIDDLE AGES

Social change in England c. 1200–1520

REVISED EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

This book is concerned with standards of living and patterns of consumption in England between the thirteenth and the early sixteenth century. It is the first work to treat the period wholly in this way, but the approach has many antecedents in historical writing going back for more than a century, and owes much to a growing tide of research in the last twenty years.

Perhaps the first modern interest in the subject can be seen among nineteenth-century antiquarians in search of curiosities and specifically of material to illustrate the social background to medieval literature. They produced works of lasting value in editions of aristocratic household accounts, which have not been used by historians until recently.[1] The first scholar to employ modern methods of analysis to the history of living standards was J. E. Thorold Rogers, a professor of economics in the universities of London and Oxford who, with remarkable energy and persistence, collected a mass of information on prices and wages from 1259 to 1793, published in seven fat volumes between 1866 and 1902.[2] His interpretation of these figures, *Six centuries of work and wages*, first appeared in 1884 and went through many reprintings and editions. Thorold

1 For example, T. H. Turner (ed.), *Manners and household expenses of the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries* (Roxburgh Club, 1841).

2 J. E. Thorold Rogers, *A history of agriculture and prices in England* (7 vols., Oxford, 1866–1902).

Rogers was a radical social reformer, for a time serving as a Liberal MP, for whom historical research was linked directly with a concern for the condition of the working class in his day. He argued that agricultural workers had suffered a continuous fall in their living standards since the middle ages. We would not share in Thorold Rogers's optimistic view of all medieval wage-earners, but his identification of the fifteenth century as the 'golden age of the English labourer' is a valuable insight that still forms part of our interpretation of the period. By providing evidence for the relatively high level of real wages in the later middle ages, Thorold Rogers gave scientific support to a widespread belief in progressive circles in the late nineteenth century that modern industrialization had destroyed an admirable traditional way of life. Their imagined 'Merrie England' of upright yeomen, honest craftsmen and village maypoles as presented in such works as William Morris's *Dream of John Ball* was, of course, a world of fantasy.[3] For us the myth is important as an expression of the outlook and attitudes of the nineteenth-century critics of expanding capitalism.

Most of the founders of the new discipline of economic history in the early twentieth century had little sympathy either with Thorold Rogers's approach, or with the socialists who had idealized medieval society. Such writers of textbooks as Lipson and Clapham were more interested in the growth and decline of economic and social institutions than in the experience of individuals.[4] Their accounts of the middle ages concentrated on the organization of economic life in the manor, the borough and the guild. They viewed society from above, especially in their preoccupation with government policies. Commerce was emphasized because it was believed that the growth of the market changed the medieval economy profoundly, and led progressively to the emergence of modern capitalism.

Thorold Rogers's work was not forgotten, and in the inter-war years William (later Lord) Beveridge continued the tradition of combining historical enquiry with a concern for current social problems; Beveridge's accumulation of statistical material has regrettably

3 W. Morris, *A dream of John Ball. A king's lesson* (Berlin, 1958), pp. 11–13, imagines rebels in 1381: 'they were merry and good tempered enough'. 'Their . . . buckles and belts and the finishing and hems of their garments were all what we should now call beautiful'. 'The houses were almost all built of oak framework . . . with their windows and doors of well moulded free-stone', and much more.

4 E. Lipson, *The economic history of England* (3 vols., London, 1915–31), vol. 1; J. Clapham, *A concise economic history of Britain* (Cambridge, 1949).

only partially been published.[5] In the post-war period, and in particular since the 1960s, interest in standards of living has grown with stimuli from at least four different directions. Firstly the study of peasants, workers, women and other underprivileged sections of society has now been widely accepted as a legitimate area of historical investigation. A notable example of this concern was the controversy over working-class living standards in the period of industrialization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which originally centred on questions of real wages and earnings, but which extended over such related problems as working-class housing conditions, and the quality of life under factory work-disciplines.[6] Such preoccupations are not confined to the period after 1750. The French school of historians associated with the journal *Annales* has had a slow but strong influence on English-speaking historians, and provides a second source of inspiration for their study of living standards. The *Annalistes* have pioneered the scientific investigation of the totality of human experience. Largely because of their work, such subjects as population, the family, diet and popular mentality are regarded as proper fields of enquiry. The most influential practitioner of this elevation of the ordinary to become an area of academic concern was Fernand Braudel, who began research with a monumental regional study of the Mediterranean, and then turned to the growth of the capitalist economy with an emphasis on consumption.[7] Braudel's work has been admired more than it has been imitated partly because of its formidable bulk and detail. A third, and quite different impetus for the investigation of living standards has come from the great expansion in archaeology since the late 1960s. The archaeologists have accumulated a mass of information, almost embarrassing in its sheer quantity, for the physical conditions of the past – called 'material culture' on the continent. This refers not just to pottery, objects of bone, stone and metal, and to the remains of houses, but also to human bones (which yield valuable information about the age of death and disease) and to animal bones and plant remains. The interpretation of this wealth of new evidence is still

5 W. Beveridge, *Prices and wages in England, from the twelfth to the nineteenth century* (London, 1939), vol. 1.

6 A. J. Taylor (ed.), *The standard of living in Britain in the industrial revolution* (London, 1975); E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (London 1965).

7 F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (2 vols., London, 1972–3); F. Braudel, *Capitalism and material life* (London, 1973); F. Braudel, *Civilization and capitalism* (3 vols., London, 1981–4).

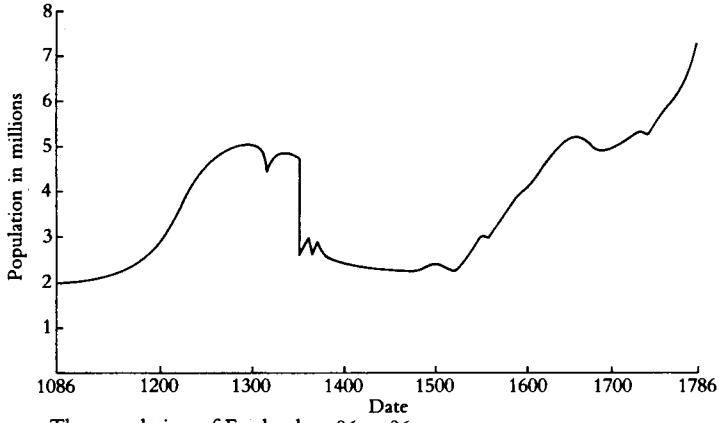

Fig. 1 The population of England, 1086–1786
For 1086 to 1525 much conjecture has been used, based on J. Hatcher, *Plague, population and the English economy, 1348–1530* (London, 1977); from 1541 the graph follows the more secure calculations in E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541–1871: a reconstruction* (London, 1981), pp. 528–9.

continuing and already, in the light of preliminary findings, historians have had to think again about some of their assumptions.[8]

A fourth influence has come from our growing awareness of contemporary 'underdeveloped', 'developing', or 'third world' economies. Here famines, poverty and technical backwardness superficially similar to the problems of medieval Europe are still causing human misery. To explain the plight of the third world is a matter of pressing importance – should we emphasize the imbalance between population and resources? Or can we point to the difficulties caused by greedy local élites? Or does the root of the problem lie in the exploitation of people and resources for the benefit of the developed countries?[9]

Pre-industrial Europe experienced fluctuations in levels of population and economic activity. In the case of England we now know in detail about population history from 1540 onward, and can with some confidence project a graph of demographic change back to the eleventh century.[10] Between the Norman Conquest and the Indus-

8 For example, C. Platt, *Medieval England* (London, 1978); H. Clarke, *The archaeology of medieval England* (London, 1984).

9 For example, S. Amin, *Unequal development* (Hassocks, Sussex, 1976); E. R. Wolf, *Europe and the people without history* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982).

10 E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541–1871: a reconstruction* (London, 1981).

trial Revolution there were three phases of expansion: in the century or two before 1300, in the sixteenth century, and in the eighteenth. In between these periods of increase were two lengthy episodes of decline or stagnation, from *c.* 1300 to *c.* 1520, and in the seventeenth century (see fig. 1). To describe these trends is relatively easy; to explain them presents many more difficulties. There must have been a relationship between living standards and movements in population, but the two interacted in very complicated ways. After 1540, it is argued that acute misery was avoided because if living standards declined, the age of marriage rose because couples could not afford to set up new households, and many people were unable to marry. There followed a fall in the birth-rate. If earnings and profits of farming, manufacture and trade increased, earlier and more frequent marriage led to a rising population. Such a regulatory system may have prevailed before 1540, but it is also likely that mortality from starvation and disease also acted as a check on population growth in hard times, so that low standards of living produced demographic catastrophes. On the other hand, the level of population could have changed independently, either upwards by natural increase, or downwards because of the effects of epidemic diseases. Living standards would tend to decline if the population rose to too high a level, through the shortage of productive land and the depressed level of wages; epidemics would bring in their wake cheap land and high wages.[11] A further level of interaction between population and prosperity relates to the market, because an increased number of people may have caused some impoverishment, but it could also stimulate demand through the multiplication of consumers.

These related problems of underdevelopment, demography and economic fluctuations were brought to the forefront of medieval historical studies by Professor Sir Michael Postan. He applied to the study of medieval England both a grasp of economic theory and personal experience of life in a peasant society in pre-revolutionary Russia. Having cast doubts on the prevailing notion of the economic historians of the 1920s and 1930s that there had been a linear growth of the market and the use of money in the middle ages, Postan developed the idea that population expansion in the thirteenth century created an excess of people, and that nature punished man for his prodigal use of resources by reducing numbers drastically in the

11 These issues are discussed in J. Hatcher, *Plague, population and the English economy, 1348–1530* (London, 1977); and R. M. Smith, 'Hypothèses sur la nuptialité en Angleterre aux XIII^{e}–XIV^{e} siècles', *Annales E.S.C.*, 38(1983), 107–36.

fourteenth century. The argument rested on the assumption that in a peasant society, the crucial determinant of all other changes was the relationship between people and land, peasants being holders of 'family farms', which provided the subsistence needs of the household, using mainly family labour. Too many people led not just to a reduction in the amount of land per head, and a diminution in the size of holdings, but also to damage to the earth itself: the area of pasture and the numbers of animals were reduced by the extension of arable land, and there was consequently a shortage of manure. Standards of living played an important part in Postan's reasoning, because in his view the crisis of *c.*1300 was brought about by growing impoverishment, while the relaxation of population pressure after 1350 created a 'golden age' for peasants as well as labourers.[12] Although Postan's arguments have been received with respect, and have won a good deal of acceptance, much of the reasoning is based on assumptions and logical deduction rather than detailed empirical research, not least in the case of standards of living.

A criticism that can be made of historians such as Postan, who stress the interaction of population and land, is their tendency to underestimate the importance of social structures. Impersonal factors, such as climate, or soil exhaustion, or the spread of microbes are placed in the forefront of the stage, and inequality and the mechanisms of social exploitation are pushed into a subsidiary rôle. Yet anyone examining demand or consumption needs to devote a great deal of attention to the enormous disparities between rich and poor. There is more to this social dimension of the study of living standards than simply assessing the varying quantity and quality of goods consumed at different social levels, though this can be a worthwhile exercise in itself. The inequalities of the middle ages were not an incidental by-product of economic activity but an inherent feature of society. The great wealth of the aristocracy derived from their military, political and judicial domination of the subordinate peasantry. Services, goods and cash flowed upwards from the peasants to the lords. At an early stage of its development the pervading feudal principle had been that tenure of land was dependent on the performance of service, whether military or administrative service in the case of the aristocracy, or labour for the peasants. In the later middle ages the services were turned into money rents, but this did not lead to any sudden transformation in the power structures of society. The manor, the administrative

12 M. M. Postan, *The medieval economy and society* (London, 1972).

organization through which lords collected rents, continued to function, and indeed was given a new lease of life in the thirteenth century when the growth of the market enabled the lord's own reserve of land, the demesne, to be run for profit, and the peasants were expected to produce a flow of cash payments. In exploring the consumption patterns of the aristocracy, often at a level of considerable luxury, we are revealing the *raison d'être* of a feudal society. The whole purpose of manors and estates was to concentrate wealth into the hands of a few, who were then expected not to hoard or save, but to redistribute the goods among their followers and supporters in acts of generous giving. We may also be exposing one of the great weaknesses of the feudal economy, and one of the sources of its backwardness, because the rest of society was deprived of resources by the constant demands of the lords. It is scarcely surprising to find that such a consumption-oriented society lacked investment capital.[13]

A simple view of the late medieval economy would depict the thirteenth century as a period of strong and wealthy lords and relatively poor peasants, with the balance being weighted in the opposite direction in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries because of peasant tenants' scarcity value, and their resistance to the lords. However, the medieval economy was complicated by the market. The wealthy aristocratic consumers put some of their wealth back into circulation by buying goods and services, so townsmen and rural craftsmen gained some indirect benefit from the riches of lords. The peasants did not forfeit all of their surplus income, and they too generated a demand for manufactures. The towns that had grown up initially to serve the needs of these rural consumers became sufficiently complex to generate an internal market, so that urban traders and craftsmen made much of their living by selling to their fellow townsmen. The commercial economy had to some extent developed a life of its own, and was subject to booms and slumps, which caused fluctuations in urban living standards quite distinct from the rise and fall in demand from the countryside.

The emphasis in historical writing has always been on the forces of production. Medieval historians have enquired into such subjects as field systems, the efficiency of corn-growing, the organization of cloth-making and the techniques of trade. It is in no way the aim of this book to detract from the importance of production, but I intend

13 R. H. Hilton, 'Rent and capital formation in feudal society' in R. H. Hilton, *The English peasantry in the later middle ages* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 174–214.

to show that the study of consumption can help our understanding of medieval society in many ways. Indeed, some notable contributions to this type of enquiry have already been made. R. H. Hilton was able to demonstrate that a small monastery, which consumed much of its own agricultural produce, was better able to survive the economic problems of the fifteenth century than a large estate. This observation had implications for small landowners in general in the period.[14] E. Veale, by paying attention to the fickle demands of fashion, was able to explain some of the changes in the late medieval fur trade.[15] E. Carus-Wilson suggested that the Devon cloth industry boomed at the end of the middle ages because its products were bought by a large, prospering, relatively lower-class group of consumers.[16] Such interpretations based on consideration of consumption are, however, somewhat exceptional. All too often agriculture is seen as a matter of cultivation and productivity, and the end products of bread, porridge, ale and fodder are forgotten. Trade is seen in terms of sellers rather than buyers. Market places and towns were indeed inhabited by merchants, shopkeepers and hucksters, but their presence would have been futile without customers. Weavers, cutlers and potters could only make their living if their cloth, knives and jugs were bought and used.

This neglect can be partly attributed to the fact that sources ideal for the study of consumption are by no means plentiful. Thousands of manorial accounts can give us a mass of information about production of aristocratic estates while accounts detailing expenditure in upper-class households survive in much smaller numbers, and then often contain fragmentary evidence. At the lower end of the social scale, hard information is not acquired easily, especially because the written sources were compiled by the upper classes for their own administrative purposes. We find ourselves involved in some guesswork, using every variety of evidence and still feeling uncertain of the results. We must venture into such elusive areas as social psychology, used with much success by Thrupp in her study of consumption patterns of London merchants, but treacherous ground for the unwary.[17]

14 R. H. Hilton, *The economic development of some Leicestershire estates in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries* (Oxford, 1947), pp. 117–38.

15 E. Veale, *The English fur trade in the later middle ages* (Oxford, 1966), especially chapter 7.

16 E. M. Carus-Wilson, *The expansion of Exeter at the close of the middle ages* (Exeter, 1963).

17 S. Thrupp, *The merchant class of medieval London* (Chicago, 1948).

Despite the difficulties and dangers involved in the study of living standards, it is a subject in need of investigation. Many others have researched parts of the subject. My purpose is to define the different levels of living standards in late medieval society, and to explore changes over three centuries. Before the enquiry can proceed, however, it is necessary to examine the stratification of society.